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William Faulkner

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The Relationship Between the Individual and Community as seen in William Faulkner's
"Dry September" and *Light in August*

The short story "Dry September" and the novel *Light in August*, both by William Faulkner, contain many similarities and many differences. The two stories share two common events: an interracial relationship and a subsequent lynching. The specifics of each event are very different, however. In many ways, Faulkner is looking at the reasons for and effects of these events from two different viewpoints. In "Dry September," Faulkner is concerned with the effect of the rape on the community, and the lynching as a collective act. With *Light in August*, on the other hand, the focus is on the details of the actual events as well as their effects on the individuals involved.

The women in the two stories, Minnie Cooper in "Dry September" and Joanna Burden in *Light in August*, share many things in common. They are both referred to as spinsters and are looked down upon as societal outcasts. According to Mary Anne Ferguson, "With very few exceptions the old maid – a single woman beyond the marriageable age of, say, thirty – has been either pitied or ridiculed in literature... a single woman who remains single in society is seen as queer, frequently thin and emaciated to

symbolize her withdrawal from life” (Roberts 149). Both of these women fit that description, in social acceptance as well as physically. They are seen as a cultural deviant who threatens the structure of society.

The two women also represent the familiar Faulkner character of the embattled virgin. This can also be seen in Byron Bunch from *Light in August* and Quentin Compson from *The Sound and the Fury*. This character usually must find a way to help cope with their repressed sexuality. Joanna and Byron sublimates it into a life of work and find other tasks in order to keep their lives busy. Minnie and Quentin, on the other hand, live a life of fantasy that eventually leads to complete mental anguish and even madness.

The actual stories of why the women have been forced to take on this role are very different, however. Although never explicitly stated, it appears that Minnie is the product of a combination of the society in which she lives and unfortunate circumstance. There is a certain amount of sympathy given to this situation, at least more than is given to the actual character. According to the text, it is not really her fault that “no man ever called on her” while she “watched the girls with whom she had grown up as they married and got homes and children” (Faulkner “These Thirteen” 44). She is described in unflattering terms, with a “slender, nervous body and a sort of hard vivacity,” though this description is more indifferent than negative (44). In order to cope with her situation, she fills her life with meaningless tasks, such as shopping, but not buying, downtown with local women, or with the fantasy of Hollywood. She lives a life with a “quality of furious unreality” (45). She is able to fulfill her repressed sexual needs by having a relationship with a banker for a short period, but this eventually just leads to the townspeople to think of her as nothing more than an adulteress.

Joanna Burden is not quite as immobile and idle as Minnie, but she still leads a similar life as an unmarried older woman. She is a societal outcast due to the abolitionist history of her family. No one wants anything to do with her because of this, and she is pretty much just left alone. Unlike in “Dry September,” we are left with no question as to why Joanna Burden is unmarried. Even her description is extremely unflattering. Her face is “prominently boned, long, a little thin, almost manlike” (Faulkner “Light in August” 291). We never learn of any true relationships outside of being taken care of by the local black population, and can only assume that unlike Minnie, she is a true virgin. She sublimates this energy into her work sending “advice, business, financial and religious, to the presidents and faculties and trustees... of a dozen Negro schools and colleges throughout the south” (291).

With these characteristics, the relationships, or lack thereof, that each woman becomes involved with matches with their personality. The rape of Minnie is completely fabricated, a figment of the fantasy life that she leads. She takes out her frustrations by making up stories and starting rumors. When he hears the accusations against Will Mayes, Hawkshaw, the barber and voice of reason, says, “I don’t believe anything happened. I leave it to you fellows if them ladies that get old without getting married don’t have the notions that a man cant...” (Faulkner “These Thirteen” 40). Hawkshaw sees right through the accusation, and knows that the rape never happened. “This aint the first man scare she ever had, like Hawkshaw says. Wasn’t there something about a man on the kitchen roof, watching her undress, about a year ago?” (41). According to Hawkshaw’s view, the spinster is someone who “imagines rapists behind every azalea bush”(Roberts 171). He knows that she is just seeking attention and uses this bizarre

fantasy of a repressed virgin to get it. She must fantasize that she is desirable, and in her situation it seems that the only person who would lust after her is a rapist.

Joanna Burden's relationship with Joe Christmas also matches her personality. Joe Christmas originally attempts to rape Joanna, but she is more compliant than he expects. "She did not resist at all. It was almost as though she were helping him..." (Faulkner "Light in August" 236). After the attempted rape, Joanna enters into a period of nymphomania (Roberts 179). All of her repressed sexuality comes out in a flood, and she becomes more dominating in the relationship than he is. She is described as a child curious about forbidden subjects and objects. Joe Christmas is "shocked" by her "insatiable desire." Like Minnie Cooper, she lives through a strange virginal rape fantasy. When making love, she yells out "Negro! Negro! Negro!" as if she views Christmas as some sort of a forbidden fruit (260). Their relationship violates the line between romance and assault with her masculinity causing ambiguity regarding the heterosexuality of the relationship. "There was no feminine vacillation... It was as if he struggled physically with another man for an object of no actual value to either..." (235).

This phase of unadulterated sexuality gradually comes to an end, however, as Joanna enters menopause. At this point, Joanna and Minnie once again become similar characters. It is in this way that Faulkner's descriptions of the seasons and weather in each story are used to great effect. "The shadow of autumn" is now upon Joanna just as the "chill and implacable import of fall cast upon summer" (261). The comparison of female barrenness to the onset of autumn is also prevalent in "Dry September." As the title suggests, the story opens in the middle of sixty-two rainless days. The town is in the middle of unrelenting dryness that allows the rumor of rape to spread "like a fire in dry

grass” (Faulkner “These Thirteen” 39). Although the descriptions of autumn are not directly applied to Minnie, the framework of the story is such that the feeling of infertility is nearly inescapable. While riding to find Will Mayes, the men in the back of the car “seemed to sweat dryly, for no more moisture came” (47). These descriptions work together with Minnie’s “idle and empty days” to paint the same picture as Joanna Burden’s menopausal state, though in a more indirect way.

“Dry September” is set in such bleak dryness that it is no wonder that the townsfolk must find some way to occupy themselves. Minnie’s life mirrors this drought, and she makes up a story of rape in order to get the attention and sympathy of the town. She takes advantage of racial prejudices, and knows just the mention of a black man attacking, insulting, or even just frightening her will be enough to rile up the men. Hawkshaw attempts to stop them, but the men refuse to listen. Under the leadership of decorated World War I soldier McLendon, the men go out to find Will Mayes, the perpetrator of the crime. McLendon’s reasoning abilities are exposed when he asks the men, “Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?” (42). Not only does this seem to prove that he doubts the rape actually occurred, it also proves that the men want to perform the lynching for no reason other than to terrorize the black community. The men go in darkness to kidnap Will Mayes and drag him, shackled, to the car. The actual lynching does not occur in the text. Other than the reaction of the people later, the only indication that it even happened is the fact that Hawkshaw sees one less person in the car as it speeds back to town.

The lynching was the act of a mob group of men who took the law into their own hands. The mob cannot really be viewed as a group acting out on their own, however.

The community not only turns a blind eye to the lynching, but they seem to sort of accept it as something that had to happen. ““What did they do with the nigger? Did they-?” “Sure. He’s all right.” “All right, is he?” “Sure. He went on a little trip” (51). The lynching was a necessary act to purge the town. Afterwards, it is noted that there is “not a Negro on the square. Not one” (51). Instead of horror at the thought of a murder, the townsfolk are relieved that it happened. Instead of the criminals, the men of the lynch mob are probably regarded as peacekeepers. They have temporarily cleansed the town of the “black burden.” Rather than thinking of Minnie as a liar, the men of the town who once shunned her now “tip their hats and follow the motion of her hips with their eyes as she passed” (51).

The lynching, and the events that lead up to it, is not quite as straightforward in *Light in August*. The crime is the ambiguous murder of Joanna Burden. There is no accusation of rape, though the police assume it. The prime suspect in the murder case is Joe Christmas’s partner Joe Brown until he uses Christmas’s unclear race to his advantage. “Accuse the white man and let the nigger go free,” he repeats (Faulkner “Light in August” 97). The sheriff immediately takes this accusation to heart. “You better be careful what you are saying, if it is a white man you are talking about,” he says. For Joe Christmas to be black is worse than for him to be a murder.

Once again, a vigilante group steps in under the façade of defending the honor of a white woman. This time under the leadership of a fanatical one-man militia named Percy Grimm. Unlike McLendon, Grimm never served in the war, a fact for which he will never forgive his parents (450). Just like McLendon, Faulkner views Grimm as a military zealot, someone whose entire life is consumed with a desire for both structure

and combat. He keeps his men “in their own make believe” (456). He is given the title of “Special Deputy” mainly because the sheriff does not know what else to do with him (455). He sets out with the goal of catching the escaped Joe Christmas, no matter what it takes. Unlike in “Dry September,” the actual lynching appears in the text. After a long chase, Grimm corners Joe Christmas in the former preacher Gail Hightower’s house. Hightower fails to stop the men, much like Hawkshaw, and Grimm shoots Joe Christmas in the kitchen and then castrates him.

The situations surrounding the lynchings are very different, although the actual murderers work under the same false pretenses. Will Mayes is lynched for the rape of Minnie Cooper, an act that he did not commit. He is basically sacrificed in a strange cleansing ritual, to relieve the town of anxiety. It is an execution of the whole black community through one man. Joe Christmas, on the other hand, is executed for killing Joanna Burden, a crime he may have committed, though it is not fully clear. Unlike McLendon, Percy Grimm is out to avenge this specific crime, with the community as an afterthought. He castrates Joe and says, “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell” (464).

Despite the differences in plot and structure, the two stories are very similar. “Dry September” was written in 1930 whereas *Light in August* was first published in 1932 (Skei 170). In many ways, the two books work as companion pieces. The ambiguities of each story seem to coincide and almost fill each other in. For example, it is not made entirely clear whether or not anything actually happened between Willie Mayes and Minnie. On the other hand, the affair between Joe Christmas and Joanna Burden is very explicit. The true race of Willie Mayes is apparent, whereas the race of Joe Christmas is

unclear even at the end of the book. The lynching of Willie Mayes is implied, while the death of Joe Christmas is told in detail. The differences and similarities between the two stories are significant, and obviously played a role in the development of each.

The influence of the two stories on each other is apparent throughout. It is as if Faulkner was interested in exploring the same topics from different angles. Themes such as interracial relationships, the position of the old maid in society, and the cultural significance of lynching are very important in both stories. In the case of “Dry September,” the focus is put on the community as a whole. The actual events are not told in detail, and instead Faulkner focuses on their effects on the community. *Light in August*, as a novel, is able to be more ambitious in scope. It takes the opposite approach, detailing the actual events and showing the effects that they have on the individuals as well as how they fit into society. In order for the reader to fully understand Faulkner’s views, it is necessary for the reader to read both stories.

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